

Sermon-Based Small Group Bible Study

World Upside Down: Transformation by Grace (Matthew 5:43–48)

Open

Select one of these “ice breakers” to get the conversation going toward the study.

- Do you have an “unlikely” friend, a friend who doesn’t fit people’s expectations of what your friends should be like? Tell us about that person.
- Have you ever received a gift or favor from someone you didn’t expect? Tell us about that.
- You’re invited to dinner with four people, living or dead (they’ll be alive for your dinner!) of your choosing. Who is on your list?

Dig

After reading Matthew 5:43–48 together, discuss these questions.

1. Note in verse 43 what Jesus says his audience had heard said. Then compare it to what the Mosaic Law actually said in Leviticus 19:18. What were some in Jesus’ time adding to what the law said? Why do you think they might have done this? (As an additional exercise, you can invite the group to read Leviticus 19:9–18 and note the ways the law specified how to put loving one’s neighbor into practice.)
2. The command to love enemies in verse 44 is coupled with being children of the Father in verse 45. Note also how the verse continues, and compare Jesus’ statement in Matthew 5:9. How is love for enemies especially fitting for people who belong to God as Jesus reveals him?
3. Tax collectors in Jesus’ time were regarded as having forfeited their identity with Israel and their membership in God’s people. Gentiles (non-Israelites) were also excluded from God’s covenant with Israel. Jesus says both groups love those who love them. How does that observation deepen the connection between loving enemies and belonging to God?
4. Verse 48 can be challenging. Try substituting the term “loving” for “perfect.” How does that continue the connection between belonging to God and loving our enemies?
5. The term “perfect” in verse 48 refers to being complete, to fulfilling one’s purpose. How does the nature of God himself show us our true purpose in life, what it means to be complete as a human being? How does it remind us we need God’s transforming power?

Summary: We sinful humans have a propensity for distorting God’s word to excuse our sin. But in God’s kingdom, God rules as king, and God’s subjects pursue with God’s help a life fully reflecting the nature and actions of God. God the Father in his amazing grace indeed loves his enemies, those in rebellion against him. He provides lovingly for all, and sends his Son to reconcile his enemies to him. Jesus loves his enemies, praying for their forgiveness as they crucify him. Perhaps our greatest challenge as kingdom people, and certainly one of our greatest differences with the world at large, is loving those who have hurt us. What could shine the light of God in the world more than loving our enemies?

Reflect

Use any of these prompts to encourage group members to apply the text to their own experiences.

- As Pastor Bryan noted, we live in a time of great social, ethnic, and political polarization. What do you think it means in our world to love our enemies, not merely “not actively hate” our enemies?
- There are situations to which this text is hard to apply. For example, does loving enemies mean welcoming an abusive parent back into the family? Why might it be loving toward enemies not to readmit them to the setting in which they did harm?
- What examples of love of enemies have you witnessed? What was the effect of that love? Does it always yield a happy ending?
- How do we exercise love toward those who reject our love? How can we love enemies who refuse to be reconciled?

Pray

Invite the group to pray together using any of these suggestions.

- What needs have you heard from others in the group that we can pray about?
- Do you have people you need to forgive, to love more consistently than you have before? Pray for God’s help and direction to take steps honoring the God of love as king.
- As you contemplate God’s love for his enemies, what is your reaction? Offer that to God in prayer, whatever shape it takes.